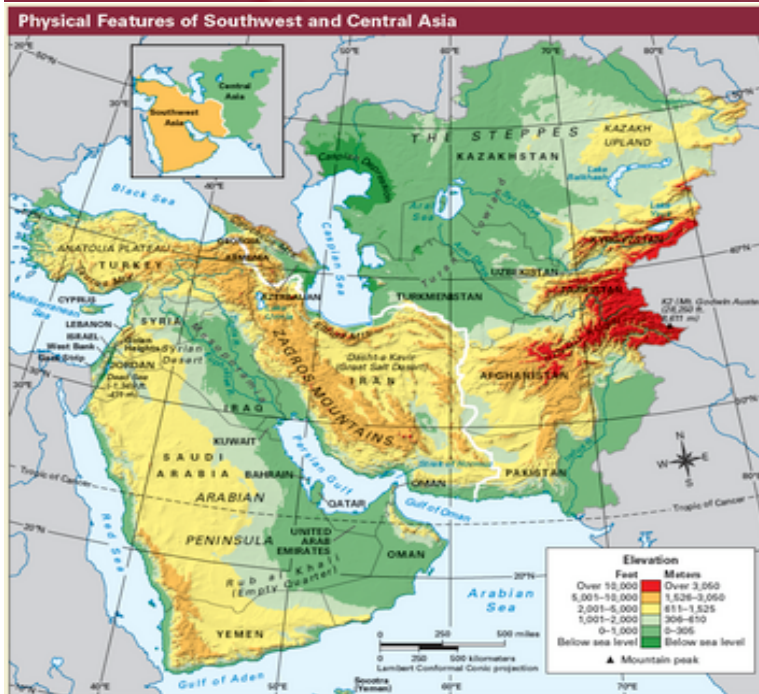


Section 1 - Introducing the Region: Physical Geography



Southwest and Central Asia are spread across one large section of the Eurasian landmass. The region is surrounded by seas, plains, and mountains. Southwest Asia lies at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and Asia. All three continents meet here at the Mediterranean Sea. Central Asia occupies the lonely center of the Eurasian landmass. Central Asia is a region of treeless plains and deserts.

Southwest Asia is bordered by several seas. The Mediterranean and Black seas mark the northwestern border. The Red Sea runs along the western side of the region. The Arabian Sea cradles the southern border.

Central Asia's northern border looks over the plains of Siberia. Rugged mountains rise along the southern and eastern borders. These mountains include the Hindu Kush, one of the highest ranges in the world.

Section 2 - Physical Features



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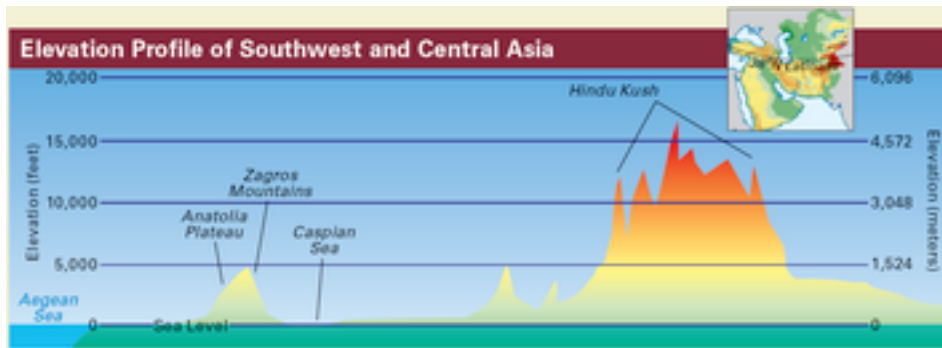
The physical landscape of Southwest and Central Asia is marked by great contrasts. This region includes both the lowest spot on Earth and some of the highest peaks. Dusty deserts cover much of the region. Yet there are also large bodies of water, such as the Persian Gulf. A **gulf** is an arm of the sea that is partly surrounded by land. The Persian Gulf is about 600 miles long. It averages almost 125 miles in width.

Southwest and Central Asia also have several **inland seas**. These are large bodies of salt water with little or no connection to the ocean. The Caspian Sea is the world's largest inland body of water. Its waters are salty, but not as salty as the ocean. As a result, this inland sea is home to both **freshwater** and saltwater fish.

Southwest Asia

Southwest Asia is a land of **peninsulas** and **plateaus**. The Arabian Peninsula occupies the southern part of the region. Covering more than 1 million square miles, it is the largest peninsula in the world.

Farther north lies the Anatolia Plateau. This rugged region stretches across much of modern Turkey. The center of the plateau has **landscapes** that are often described as “moonscapes.” **Erosion** by wind and water has carved the hills in this volcanic region into caves, cones, and strange shapes called “fairy chimneys.”



Southwest Asia has other interesting features, including

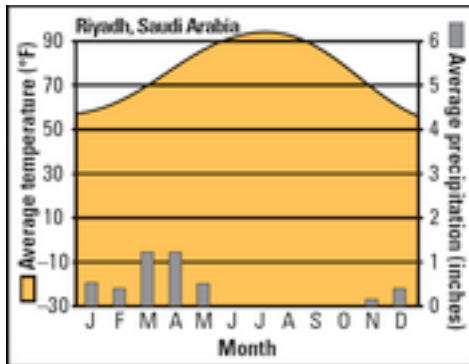
- the Arabian Sea—a shipping route known as a “hurricane alley” because of the violent storms that develop there.
- the Tigris-Euphrates Valley—one of the most fertile river valleys of the ancient world.
- the Dead Sea—an inland sea between Israel and Jordan. At about 1,349 feet below sea level, it is the lowest place on Earth. The Dead Sea is nine times as salty as the ocean. This is so salty that almost nothing can live in its waters.

Central Asia

Central Asia also varies greatly in elevation. The Caspian Sea lies below sea level. But some Hindu Kush peaks rise over 25,000 feet.

Central Asia boasts some of Earth’s largest inland seas. The Black Sea covers an area larger than the state of California. The Aral Sea was another large inland sea, but it is rapidly shrinking in size.

Section 3 - Climate



[Click to read caption](#)

Despite the many seas in this area, Southwest and Central Asia is a region of arid and semiarid [climate zones](#). Areas with an [arid](#) climate zone receive less than 10 inches of [precipitation](#) a year. But that is an average. An arid area may receive no rainfall for several years. Then, large amounts of rain might fall in a few hours. Areas with a [semiarid](#) climate have some rain now and then.

Arid and semiarid climate zones are often the hottest places on Earth. Summer temperatures may reach 100°F or higher during the day. Winters are usually mild. There are, however, cold deserts. Some are cold because they lie at a high altitude. Others are cold because they are far from the equator. Still others are chilled by cold winds.

Southwest Asia

Temperatures inland on the arid Arabian Peninsula can climb to 115°F in the summer. There is little moisture in the air, so the air cools rapidly at night. Temperatures can drop sharply in just a few hours.

In coastal areas, the seas create a more moderate climate. For example, coastal Turkey enjoys a [Mediterranean](#) climate. The same climate zone extends south along the seacoast into Israel. Summers here are warm and dry. Winters are mild and rainy.

The climate varies more in the mountainous parts of this region. In general, temperatures drop as one goes up in elevation.

Central Asia

The tall mountains that bound Central Asia prevent storms that form over the Indian Ocean from reaching the center of the continent. As a result, little rain falls in this inland region. Thus, most of Central Asia has an arid or semiarid climate.

Two large deserts cover much of the Turan Lowland. North of this arid plain lie the [steppes](#). Precipitation on these rolling plains is less than 15 inches a year.

The mountains of Central Asia have varied climates, depending on elevation. The highest peaks of the Hindu Kush are covered with snow throughout the year.

Section 4 - Vegetation



Click to read caption

[Vegetation](#) in Southwest and Central Asia is limited by the dry climate. [Desert scrub](#) covers much of the region. Desert scrub is mostly small trees and shrubs that can survive long periods without rain.

Plants adapt to arid conditions in many ways. For example, desert plants rarely grow close together. By being spread out, each plant can pull water from a larger area. Some plants obtain water from deep beneath the ground. The roots of the acacia tree may reach as much as 100 feet underground in search of water. Other plants store precious rainwater in their leaves, roots, or stems. For example, the aloe plant stores water in its long, thick leaves. Aloe leaves have a waxy surface that limits water loss.

Many other desert plants also survive by reducing water loss through their leaves. The leaves of desert bushes tend to be small and sparse. During very dry periods, plants may shed their leaves altogether.

Southwest Asia

Southwest Asia has a mixture of [vegetation zones](#). The type of plants growing in a particular place depends mostly on the temperature and rainfall.

Patches of [temperate grassland](#) appear on the central Anatolia Plateau. These grasses are adapted to the cooler climate found in this highland area.

Hills and river valleys are covered with [mixed forests](#). Both deciduous and coniferous trees grow in these areas. At higher elevations, only coniferous trees grow.

The Mediterranean coastline supports [chaparral](#). The small trees and bushes of this area are well adapted to a Mediterranean climate.

Desert scrub covers the deserts in southern Israel and much of the Arabian Peninsula. The more arid parts of this peninsula are too dry to support much plant life.

Central Asia

Temperate grasslands cover the steppes that stretch across the northern part of Central Asia. Steppes are broad, treeless plains that are usually covered with grasses.

Farther south, much of the region is covered in desert scrub. In the spring, the desert grasses and shrubs burst into bloom. Later on, the heat of summer dries them out.

Trees grow in areas with adequate water. The saxaul tree grows only in Central Asia. For thousands of years, people have relied on saxaul for firewood. The region is also known for its walnut trees. [Deciduous](#) and [coniferous forests](#) grow in highland areas.

In the eastern part of Central Asia, the mountains are very high. This small [ice cap](#) zone is too cold to support any plant life.

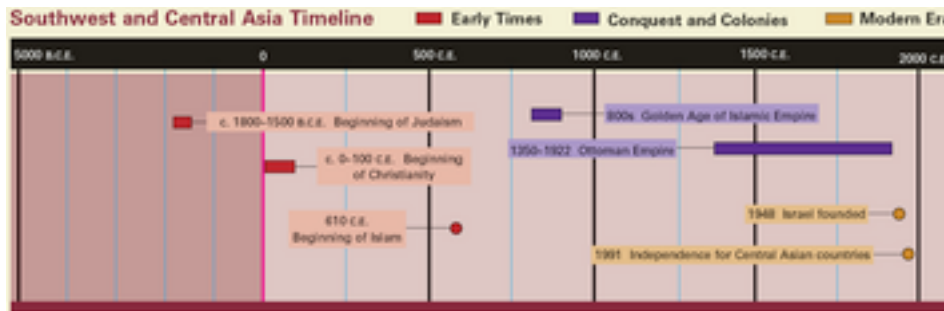
Section 5 - Human Geography



The Southwest and Central Asia region has 25 countries. Pakistan has by far the largest population. More than 162 million people live there. The largest country in area is Kazakhstan. The United Arab Emirates is the wealthiest country on a [per capita](#) basis. It is also one of the smaller countries in this region.

Southwest and Central Asia have long been linked by trade. Camel caravans carried trade goods from Southwest Asia across Central Asia to China and back as far back as 2,000 years ago. The two parts of this region are also linked to each other by a common faith. Most people in this region follow the religion of Islam.

Section 6 - History



Southwest Asia is known as the “cradle of civilization.” Farming began here. The world’s first cities arose here. This region is also the birthplace of three major religions. All three share the belief that there is only one God. Each religion began with a single person. And each has its own sacred writings, or holy book.

Early Times

According to the Torah, or Jewish holy book, Judaism was founded around 1800 B.C.E by a man named Abraham. God told Abraham to leave his home on the Euphrates River. Abraham obeyed and moved his family to the land now known as Israel. God promised Abraham that this land would belong to him and his descendents if they would set the example of how God wants people to live. Abraham’s descendents are known as Jews.

Christianity began with a Jew named Jesus about 2,000 years ago. The Gospels, part of the Christian Bible, or holy book, say that Jesus became a preacher in Israel. His words attracted many followers. They also created enemies powerful enough to have him killed. The Gospels say Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his followers. Those who follow the teachings of Jesus are known as Christians. Islam was founded on the Arabian Peninsula by a prophet named Muhammad. In 610 C.E., Muhammad told his family that he had seen an angel sent by God. The angel came many times, bringing Muhammad messages from God. These messages were later collected in the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam. Those who follow the teachings of the Qur’an are known as Muslims.

Conquest and Colonies

After his death, Muhammad's followers spread Islam across Southwest Asia, North Africa, and Spain. By the late 800s, Muslim kingdoms were centers of a brilliant culture.

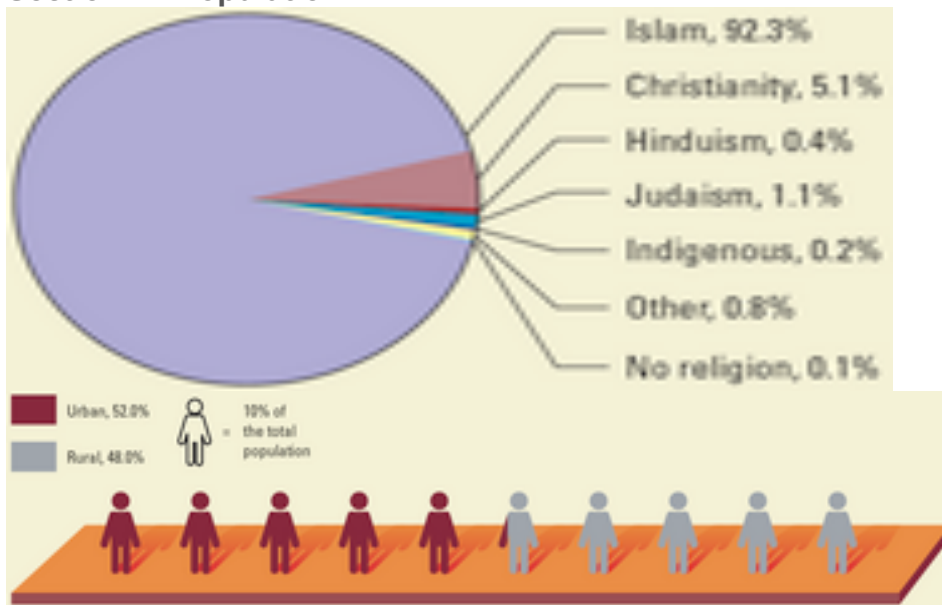
Later, Turks from Central Asia established the Ottoman Empire in this same region. Islam was the empire's official religion. But Ottoman rulers allowed people of other faiths to live in peace in their empire.

The Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1922. Its territory was carved up into a patchwork of countries and colonies. The Soviet Union took over parts of Central Asia. Britain and France created colonies in Southwest Asia.

The Modern Era

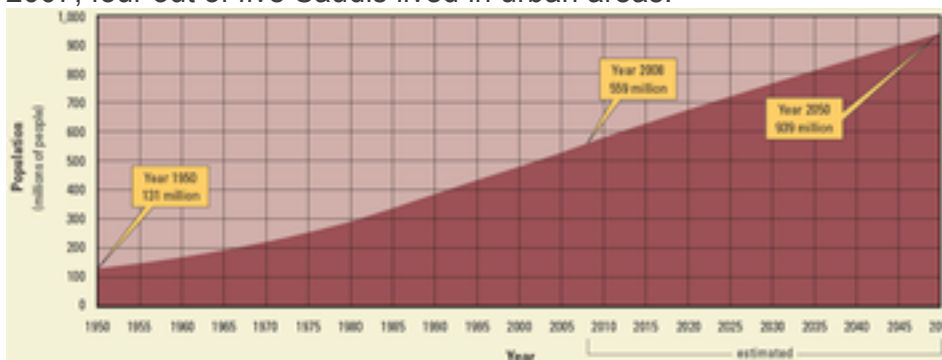
In time, most countries in Southwest and Central Asia threw off colonial rule. Iraq became independent in 1932. Israel was founded as a Jewish state in 1948. The countries of Central Asia broke away from the Soviet Union after its collapse in 1991. Today, deep conflicts divide this region. Many stem from religious differences. In many parts of Southwest Asia, Muslims oppose the existence of the Jewish state of Israel. In some Muslim countries, there is conflict between the two main branches of Islam—Sunnis and Shi'ites. In Central Asia, Christians sometimes clash with Muslims.

Section 7 - Population



About 559 million people live in Southwest and Central Asia. They make up only 8 percent of the world's population. People are not spread evenly across the region. A few places have a [population density](#) of well over 250 people per square mile. Many more places have less than 2 people per square mile.

This region is still mostly [rural](#). Yet the population has become more [urban](#) in recent years. In Saudi Arabia, for example, only one Saudi in four lived in a city in 1970. By 2007, four out of five Saudis lived in urban areas.



The Southwest and Central Asia region has one of the fastest-growing populations in the world. It also has one of the youngest populations. The majority of its people are younger than 25.

Most people in this region are Muslim. About 85 to 90 percent of these are Sunni Muslims. Only about 10 to 15 percent are Shi'ites. The region is also home to smaller numbers of Jews and Christians. Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, has holy sites sacred to each of these three religious groups.

Section 8 - Economic Activity



Click to read caption

Two resources shape [economic activity](#) in Southwest and Central Asia. The first is petroleum, or oil. The second is water. Oil is important because the region is rich in it. Water is important for the opposite reason—because the region has so little of it. As in other arid places, a lack of water limits commercial farming and livestock raising. In many areas, there is not enough water to grow large crops.

[Nomadic herding](#), however, is still important in this region. Nomadic herders move around to find food and water for their herds. Their camels, sheep, and goats graze on the wild grasses in one area. Then, when the grass is gone, the herders move their animals to a fresh grazing area. Herders depend on their animals to meet most of their needs. They use and sell their animals' milk and meat. They also make tents and clothing from their animals' skin and wool.

Resources

[Fossil fuels](#) are key resources in this region. Southwest Asia has the world's largest known oil deposits. Because refined oil is used to fuel cars, trucks, and planes, it is in great demand worldwide. Countries with large oil deposits have grown rich meeting this demand.

In Central Asia, coal is an important fossil fuel. Coal is used for heating and for generating electricity. It is plentiful in Kazakhstan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has large natural gas fields.

Land Use

Commercial farming is an important economic activity in some parts of this region. Olives, wheat, and fruit grow well along the Mediterranean coast. Dates grow in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran. Cotton is an important crop in Iran and Central Asia.

In some very dry areas, farmers have worked hard to make the most of their scarce water. Israel, for example, is more than half desert, yet it produces 95 percent of the food its people need.

Large cities are centers of trade and manufacturing. In Israel, many companies develop computer software and other advanced products. Israel also has a diamond cutting industry. In Pakistan, factories turn out cotton cloth and clothing for export. Industries in Iran produce building materials, leather goods, and tools.

Summary

Southwest Asia lies at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and Asia. Central Asia sits in the center of the Eurasian landmass. Containing both the lowest spot and some of the highest peaks on Earth, this region varies greatly in physical features. Both vast deserts and large bodies of water are part of this region. This region has arid and semiarid climate zones. Because of the dry climate, vegetation is limited to desert scrub and some forests in areas with enough water.

Southwest Asia is home to the world's first cities and three of the world's major religions. Today, the region is divided by conflicts that stem from religious differences. In addition, oil and water are two resources that shape economic activity in this region.